

## *How to properly store and organize cleaning chemicals*

By Dawn Shoemaker

As part of a charity event, several luxury apartments in a prestigious Chicago condominium were opened for visitors to admire. It gave people an opportunity to see “how the other half lives.”

One unit especially caught the attention of many visitors, not only because of its design and furnishings, but also because of the scores of closets. In fact, there were so many that some nosy visitors decided to open a couple.

To



their surprise, they found the closets dirty and cluttered--everything from clothes to children’s toys randomly tossed around and on the floor. Shoes were strewn about, and even an old computer monitor--circa 1990--was on the floor.

Needless to say, as beautiful as the apartment was, visitors left with a different impression of the unit--and its owners. A cluttered closet is often a sign of distress, lack of harmony and clarity and, if nothing else, poor housekeeping. According to John Walker, a cleaning consultant and founder of Janitor University, some archaeologists even study the way early civilizations stored items because that indicated how advanced, organized, health-conscious and even intelligent early peoples were. The same may be true of janitorial closets. A disorganized closet looks unprofessional and unhealthy, and often tells building occupants, visitors and facility managers, “We [the cleaning crew] don't really know or care about what we are doing.”

### **But LEED Cares**

So important are janitorial closets that LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) awards a minimum of one point toward LEED certification if the closets are clean and well-organized. The assessment criteria state closets should be:

- Structurally sealed
- Separate from the ventilation system used in the rest of the facility--including an independent ventilation system
- Equipped with hot- and cold water and drains
- Organized so that cleaning chemicals and products are easily found
- Adequately lit.

Adhering to these criteria is important even for those facilities not seeking LEED certification. And the reason is simple: the janitorial closet is the "office" of the custodial department. It reflects the level of professionalism--or lack thereof. An improperly maintained closet also has a tendency to cause worker anxiety, diminishing the cleaning workers' effectiveness.

### **Safety Concerns**

There are safety issues to consider as well. “Commercial cleaning chemicals stored in janitorial closets can be dangerous,” says Stephen Ashkin, president of The Ashkin Group, a consulting firm for “green” cleaning products. “And the threat becomes all the more severe when the closet is cluttered, dirty and disorganized.”

Ashkin adds that this is true whether the products stored are environmentally preferable (“green”) or

conventional. “Without question, a “green” cleaning product is typically safer than a conventional cleaning product, but just because a product is “green” does not mean it is always safe. All cleaning chemicals can be dangerous if misused, incorrectly mixed or improperly stored.”

For instance, a common cleaning product found in a janitorial closet is bleach. Its most active ingredient is sodium hypochlorite, which can vary in concentration depending on the product. Although bleach is not considered environmentally friendly, it definitely is a powerful disinfectant. However, mixing it with or even storing it near products such as ammonia, drain-, window-, or toilet-bowl cleaners, or some floor and carpet cleaners can potentially lead to dangerous accidents.

In fact, accidents using and storing bleach and other chemicals are fairly common. Overall, it is estimated that each year six of every 100 janitors are injured by the cleaning chemicals they use.

### **The Janitorial Closet Makeover**

“Cleaning and reorganizing a janitorial closet is often put off because it can take time,” says Ashkin. “However, for safety reasons alone, it can be time well-spent.”

Further, according to Ashkin, many facility managers find that once a janitorial closet has been cleaned and properly organized, building users and cleaning professionals tend to keep it that way. Some of his recommendations for performing a closet makeover include:

1. Meet with the cleaning crew and examine each janitorial closet. Explain the importance of a clean and organized area, emphasizing protecting their health as one of the key goals. If the building’s janitorial closets are disorganized and unkempt, and have mops stored in soiled water that emit offensive odors, it's time to start turning things around.

2. Empty the closets. It is likely there are items that are no longer used or have not been used for several months. A good guideline for tools and equipment is that if it has not been used in a year, get rid of it.

However, when it comes to cleaning chemicals, another rule applies: store only enough chemical in sprayers or secondary containers needed for about one week. Because many cleaning chemicals are sold in multigallon containers and may be highly concentrated--especially if they are “green”--they can last for months. These larger containers should be stored in a separate, well-ventilated and isolated area.

3. Clean and paint. The cleaning standards that apply to other areas of the facility should be applied to

the janitorial closets.

As part of the process, ensure that all vents are clean and operating correctly. Many times, dust builds up over the years to the point that the ventilation system is no longer performing correctly. Remove the cover and vacuum/clean inside the vent as much as possible.

Now look at the walls. If they are soiled, clean them. Even better, apply a fresh coat of light-colored paint so that tools and supplies are more visible and easier to locate.

4. Evaluate the mechanicals. Ensure that an efficient shelving system is installed. Many facilities select grill/rack-type shelving instead of solid shelving. The rack shelving helps improve air circulation and ventilation, and also allows spills to fall to the floor where they can be cleaned up more easily.

5. Check the lighting. Often janitorial closets have no lights, which make them harder to maintain and accidents more likely. The closet should have proper lighting that is operated by a wall switch, or comes on when the door is opened.

6. Restock, organize, and prioritize. Select only the chemicals, tools and equipment used regularly, limiting storage to approximately one week's worth of products. Items should be organized based on how they are used, and the shelves should be labeled so that it is clear which products belong on each one. A color-coding system can be instituted for better identification. For instance, place blue labels on shelves, sprayers or chemicals to indicate these are window-cleaning products, yellow labels for floorcare products, red labels for restroom products, etc.

### **Keeping It Clean, “Green” And Organized**

Although custodial workers often take better care of janitorial closets once they are clean and well-organized, this does not mean they should go uninspected. Supervisors and managers should check regularly to ensure the closet makeover is intact. This will help make sure the cleaning workers look professional, the facility is well-run, and the health and safety of workers and the entire building will be protected as well.

Many facilities also go a step further and use the closet makeover as a time to reconsider the cleaning products to be selected. “It is well-documented that conventional cleaning products can contain chemicals associated with respiratory irritation, skin and eye injury, ozone depletion, cancer and indoor

air[quality] problems,” says Ashkin. “If one of the goals of the closet makeover is greater efficiency, organization and health, then without question the makeover should include a transfer to environmentally preferable cleaning products.”

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### **Chemical Storage Quick Tips**

- Store cleaning chemicals on shelves with the front label facing out.
- All chemicals should be stored at eye-level and easily reachable.
- Use small containers, one-gallon size or less.
- Keep all containers tightly closed.
- If there is a leak, replace the container.
- Keep the floor of the closet clean and neat--mop up any chemical spills immediately.

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